
H-France Review Vol. 12 (November 2012), No. 146

Marc Bizer, *Homer and the Politics of Authority in Renaissance France*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. xii + 245 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-19-973156-5.

Review by Zachary S. Schiffman, Northeastern Illinois University.

The genesis of Marc Bizer's illuminating study, *Homer and the Politics of Authority in Renaissance France*, extends back to his student days at the University of Tübingen, when a classics professor compared Odysseus's ten-year journey home to the equally long repatriation of German prisoners after World War II. This was Bizer's first exposure to Homer as a kind of lightning rod—gathering and channeling the multitude of political and cultural forces that charge the atmosphere surrounding his perennial readership. Indeed, he is a bifurcated lightning rod, with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—a warrior epic and a romance epic—offering Homer's readers the opportunity not only to embody their concerns but also to reflect critically upon them, and nowhere (it seems) was this dual effect more pronounced than in sixteenth-century France. The portentous growth of the monarchy in the first half of the century terminated with the outbreak of the Wars of Religion, which nearly put paid to the kingdom. During this eventful time, the Homeric corpus channeled thoughts about literary culture and its connection to the central issues of the day, monarchy and sovereignty. These enticing topics offer only a sampling of the fare served up in this subtle and sophisticated work, where Bizer's considerable scholarship has the rare effect of enlivening, rather than deadening the palate.

The itinerary of part one, "Making Homer French, 1530-1560," traces the bard's influence during the heyday of the Valois monarchy through the careers of Guillaume Budé, Jean Dorat, Joachim Du Bellay, and Etienne de la Boétie. The French vogue of Homeric interpretation builds on and transforms an earlier, Italian tradition of Virgilian exegesis. Although Homer, the inventor of poetry, was commonly regarded as one of the great sages—if not *the* greatest—the genre he created was studied chiefly in its Virgilian guise during the Quattrocento, if only because the revival of Latin literature preceded that of Greek. Italian humanists like Cristoforo Landino read the *Aeneid* as an allegory about virtue in general, applicable to both public and private life; and in their allegorizing, they eschewed specific parallels between the contemporary Italian scene and the mythological Virgilian one. Ironically, then, Virgil did not become Italian in the same way that Homer would become French.

The French appropriation of Homer owes chiefly to the work of Guillaume Budé, the great standard-bearer of French humanism, who used Homer to establish both the importance of political education for the French court and the necessity of supporting the humanistic purveyors of that education. Budé's reading of Homer reflected the pervasive influence of Pseudo-Plutarch's *Essay on the Life and Poetry of Homer*, which celebrated Homer as a fountainhead of knowledge on all subjects, including politics. Indeed, through the lens of Pseudo-Plutarch, the epics appeared to present monarchy as the best form of government. Not surprisingly, then, Budé seized upon arguments from Homer as a means of gaining royal patronage for the advancement of classical learning, in particular by demonstrating its relevance to monarchical statecraft.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Bizer, who not only examines Budé's more widely-read *L'Institution du prince* in this regard, but also analyzes *De asse*, *De philologia*, and *De transitu Hellenismi ad Christianismum*—

-immensely difficult texts skirted by most scholars. This body of work, spanning the entirety of his career, shows how Budé transformed the previous tradition of Virgilian exegesis and how this transformation itself evolved in response to the changing political and religious situation in France. Building on the myth of the Trojan origin of the Franks popularized by Jean Lemaire de Belges, Budé moved Homer to the center of political education in *De l'institution du prince* (1518-1519), a work presented in manuscript to the young Francis I. Here Budé argued that the king could learn "prudence"-political wisdom—from literature when guided by humanists, who (in turn) could help glorify his achievements. Although Budé emphasized the importance of reading history, Homer emerged for him as the chief authority sanctioning the kind of prudential court humanism he advocated, as exemplified by the wise Nestor's counsel, which was worth more to Agamemnon than the services of ten warriors.

The specific connections Budé found between Homer and the requirements of political virtue in sixteenth-century France marked a break with the previous tradition of Virgilian exegesis, which focused on a more general and more Christian notion of virtue. Budé elsewhere elaborated on this political theme, especially in *De philologia* (1532), where Odysseus and Penelope model the kind of creative introspection by which the king (guided by the eloquence of wise counselors) continually reworks the fabric of his kingdom, strengthening and extending it. By means of such arguments, Budé placed Homer at the center of a discourse where literary and political authority intersected, a conjunction superintended by the humanists themselves. In *De transitu* (1535), however, Budé had to dial back his political philhellenism in favor of a more traditional, moral exegesis of Homer, lest he lose royal support after the king's crackdown on Christian humanists and Protestant reformers in the wake of the Day of the Placards (1534).

Jean Dorat continued in the tradition established by Budé, drawing even more explicit parallels between Homeric themes and the contemporary French political scene. For example, he likened Odysseus to the king surrounded by his royal companions and he read Odysseus's adventures allegorically as political fables designed to instruct the king and thus to shape the realm. In contrast to Budé, Dorat intensified his political philhellenism in the wake of the Day of the Placards, using the story of Odysseus and the sirens to argue that the king required the advice of wise counselors, humanists like himself, to steer the ship of state. This openly political kind of Homeric exegesis gained increasing currency, in part because of Dorat's influence with the poets of the Pléiade, who became for all practical purposes the royal mythographers of Henry II's reign, and in part because the untimely death of Henry II created a wave of instability that influential humanists hoped to redress. The application of Homer to contemporary politics was expressly apparent in the iconography of royal entry ceremonies—celebrating the king's visits to the cities of his realm—which highlighted the Trojan origins of the monarchy, especially with reference to scenes and characters from the *Iliad*. By these and other artistic means, an increasingly insecure monarchy sought to create the appearance of stability through the authority of Homer.

Not all humanists, though, openly embraced this association between Homer and the French monarchy. Whereas Pierre de Ronsard composed for the crown an *Iliad*-like epic about France's Trojan origins, his friendly rival, Joachim Du Bellay, penned an *Odyssey*-like romance—*Regrets* (1558)—about his wanderings on diplomatic missions that took him far from the center of court culture. As Bizer shows in a remarkably subtle analysis, Du Bellay's choice of a lyrical-romantic form rather than an epical-heroic one embodied his ambivalence about serving the king, an ambivalence that questioned the importance of court humanism and even of monarchy itself.

In Etienne de la Boétie's *De la Servitude Volontaire* (written and circulated in the early 1550s), this ambivalence gave way to outright criticism of the authority of both Homer and monarchy. La Boétie's treatise began with a quotation from the *Iliad* that traditionally had been interpreted as a support for monarchy but that, in La Boétie's hands, became a criticism of any political system where people voluntarily accept servitude under one man. Ironically, Odysseus became for him the model of a right-thinking subject who submitted himself only to reason. This treatise reflected the growing tension

between a centralizing monarchy and the regional *parlements*, such as La Boétie's Parlement of Bordeaux where he served as a judge; and his subsequent criticism of the monarchy's Edict of Toleration in 1562 reflected his impatience with a crown increasingly willing to sacrifice religious principle for political advantage. At the same time La Boétie was posing his challenge to Homer and monarchy, the myth of the Trojan origins of the Franks was undergoing such a critical reevaluation at the hands of scholars like Etienne Pasquier that even Ronsard, the great embellisher of the Trojan myth, began to express his own reservations about it. This demythologizing of the monarchy reflected its destabilization after the death of Henry II and the onset of the Wars of Religion.

The fairly straightforward allegorizing of Homer that predominates in most of part one of Bizer's book gives way to a much more tangled itinerary in part two, "Homer and the Problem of Authority During the Wars of Religion (1560-1592)." Jean Begat's *Remonstrance* (1563), objecting to the recent royal edict of toleration, was indicative of a new, more ambivalent reading of Homer and his relationship to monarchy. At one and the same time, Begat invoked the bard to reaffirm the importance of the monarch and to criticize him for having undermined the religious unity of the kingdom. Begat's *Remonstrance* evoked an immediate Protestant response, the *Apologie de l'édit du roy*, which pointedly omitted any mention of Homer, drawing its arguments instead from scripture. But in the ensuing pamphlet war that marked France's descent into political anarchy during the Wars of Religion, Protestants as well as Catholics—the latter including both Leaguers and *politiques*—made free use of Homer to support a variety of positions regarding monarchy and sovereignty. This literature appropriated Homer not to allegorize the monarchy but to satirize it and even to evoke nostalgia for the "good old days" of a prudent king and a stable kingdom.

The yearning for stability underlies the moderate Catholic Guillaume Paquelin's *Apologeme pour le grand Homère* (1579), which sought to reestablish Homer's political authority as a prelude to reestablishing order in the kingdom. Although Paquelin directed his defense of Homer against Plato's criticisms of the poet, this ancient controversy did not have much currency in Renaissance France. The real rationale for Paquelin's defense was to reaffirm Homer's textual authority in political matters as a propaedeutic to restoring the monarchy's political authority. By contrast, the Protestant Jean de Sponde used his 1583 commentary on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to question the actions of the Valois monarchy, in part by critiquing the Homeric heroes with whom the king and his minions had traditionally been compared. Robert Garnier upbraided the monarchy by allegorical means in his tragedy, *La Troade* (1579), which presented the Homeric heroes in a thoroughly negative light as the instruments of *Machtpolitik*, rather than prudence. The loosening of Homer's political authority culminated in Montaigne's *Essays*, where he demonstrated that there were as many Homers as there were interpreters, each of whom presented himself as authoritative. Echoing the sentiments of his dead friend La Boétie, Montaigne asserted that Frenchmen must free themselves from this crowd of intellectual tyrants, an assertion that implicitly undermined Budé's vision of court humanism. By unmasking the "authority" of Homer, Montaigne encouraged "voluntary servitude" to divine truth—the only unquestionable authority—and to God's vice-regent, the king. Montaigne thus ended up dethroning Homer and his humanistic interpreters while exalting absolute monarchy.

This is the one aspect of Bizer's thesis that gives me some slight pause, for it seems to support an interpretation of Montaigne as someone who used skepticism simply to bolster faith in traditional religion. Montaigne's criticism of Homeric interpreters was of a piece with his ridicule of philosophic systematizers, all of whom contradicted each other. He did not intend such criticism to move us toward an acceptance of divine (revealed) truth but rather to encourage us to acknowledge our own human weakness, which could then serve as the foundation for a rejuvenated judgment (prudence, if you will). His focus was less on God the Creator than on man the creature. Having stated my reservations in such a general way, though, I must bow before the subtlety of Bizer's analysis, which interweaves a range of important themes running through the *Essays* and thus belies my attempt to reduce it to a simple statement. It brings to light hidden aspects of the text, showing how Montaigne's attitudes toward La

Boétie, friendship, government, and religion resonate with each other across a number of frequencies. Indeed, Bizer's entire book is pervaded with this kind of scholarly dexterity, a lightness of touch—a carefulness of reading—that allows his texts to speak for themselves. And as they do so, the modern reader experiences them—and Homer—as a Renaissance reader would have. To put it most broadly, the subtlety and sophistication of Bizer's analysis of Homer in the French Renaissance make the humanist ideal of *imitatio* come well and truly alive. That is a rare accomplishment.

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ISSN 1553-9172